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The Childless Missionary Woman: A Plea for Understanding

I was hoping for a peaceful afternoon, but two rambunctious toddlers were clambering across the sofa and fighting to sit next to me. One child broke his brother's toy, and I had to coax the guilty party to apologize. They made peace and soon were zipping around the room at speeds that nearly gave me a headache. When they started their second shouting match, that's when I made the decision: I'm leaving. They saw me pick up my bag and begged for me to stay. I felt a twinge of guilt, but quickly brushed it off.

After all, they are not even my kids.

In my work as an overseas missionary, I often play surrogate mother to children in my target community. I love children, and yet I love that I can leave them with their parents at the end of the day. The fact that children seem to gravitate towards me has led many people to ask why I do not have little ones of my own. It's a fair question. I'm in my late 20s, happily married, and yet have shown no signs of fluffing the baby nest. I know I'm not the only one who is childless by choice. Likewise, I know I'm not the only childless woman who is constantly peppered with comments, questions, and suggestions about motherhood that in the end, only make us feel substandard, defeminized, and misunderstood. I am writing this article on behalf of the many Adventist women who, like me, struggle against discrimination and judgmental attitudes within and without the church for choosing not to create progeny.

As childless women, we have to contend with a constant stream of misunderstanding. Some well-meaning church members may ask if we've seen a doctor, wondering if there may be some medical dysfunction in either my husband or me. Truth be told, the doctor would most likely roll his eyes and tell us to stop using contraception, but I can't tell that to the lovely, white-haired ladies that suggest such checkups.

Another misconception about childless women is that we have some dark skeleton in the closet. Perhaps we were abused as children, and have deep emotional scars that we don't want to pass on to our little ones. While this may be the case with some women, it is not my reality, and only makes me feel uncomfortable when people insinuate it. How much more uncomfortable would I feel if this *really* were my reality? Let us be careful how we address childless women.

Another misunderstanding views childless women as spiritually immature or selfish. At a recent Christmas party where Adventist missionaries from our district gathered together to celebrate the season, a well-meaning colleague struck up "the conversation." It usually begins as light banter, with jokes about "when are you going to have your own," "it's not too late yet," and "you still have plenty of time," but eventually it gets more difficult to ward off the pressure, especially when Ellen White enters the picture.

"Ellen White has so much to say about how children perfect your character," my colleague, mother of two children, told me with deep concern. "I've seen in my own life how they truly complete me. It's a wonderful experience that helps us to grow spiritually. Mrs. White is so clear about a woman's role being primarily as a wife and mother—without children, you can never really reach your full potential as a woman."

Having a deep love and respect for the words of Ellen White, I was not unfamiliar with the concepts my colleague was sharing. But the barb among the roses was a suggestion that I am somehow only quasi-female without children, and can only attain to a partial level of character growth without them.

"Yes, I read that," I responded. "But her concepts on motherhood are multifaceted, because in the book *Adventist Home*, Ellen White writes that a childless couple becomes a selfish couple (1973:159). But in the exact same book, she also writes that missionaries should have small families or no children at all (165, 169). So, I guess you could understand it both ways. Maybe our ministry functions in the same way as children, to perfect our characters. If we are constantly giving to those we serve, the ministry can keep us from becoming selfish." My friend, undeterred, suggested that I think more about motherhood—after all, I still have time.

Today's medical conventions are helping women to successfully bear children even into their 40s. It may be that in the future, my husband and I will decide to create our own little flock. But for now, we are fully immersed in mission work for people who have never heard the gospel. To have a child would be irresponsible on our part, either the work would receive decreased attention, or the child would.

I think of the heroic missionary William Carey, lauded as the "Father of

Modern Missions.” What the exciting missionary volumes usually don’t bring out about his life is that during his 41 years in India, Carey’s four children were horribly neglected and wild. Carey’s wife, suffering from mental dementia, was unable to give them the appropriate attention that they needed, and Carey himself was so absorbed in his labors to translate the Bible and expand the borders of Christianity that very little effort went into shaping his children’s characters. It is only because other missionary wives stepped in to fill the gap that his oldest son, Felix, ever became a preacher—indeed, it was a miracle that he became anything more than a wild “tiger,” as he was described in his childhood years. Many missionary families have successfully reared well-adjusted children in overseas contexts, but many others have been disappointed at how their busy missionary lifestyle has shaped (or misshaped) their sons and daughters. Whether or not to have children while ministering overseas is a question that deserves the utmost caution—and it cannot be answered for you by anyone else. No one from the church, family, or mission compound can look in from the outside and successfully judge your temperament to know how well you would be able to simultaneously juggle these two all-absorbing life callings.

Bearing children in mission contexts is not merely a question about “do you *want* children?” Of course I want children. Don’t you think that when I see billboards with chubby-cheeked babies, I yearn to hold one in my own arms? Don’t you think that when I hold *your* baby, I imagine what it would feel like to grow a little life in my womb, to feed it from my own body, to watch it look up to me in utter trust and dependence? No, I don’t have any medical problems, skeletons in the closet, or spiritual malfunctions. At the end of the day, I am a woman, and I do have deep, sometimes irrepressible urges to motherhood.

But I’ve also experienced a calling. And that calling to evangelize the lost comes before any other consideration in my life.

Have you ever had to give up something that you deeply desired for the sake of doing God’s will for your life? A certain relationship, or career path, or cherished activity? Then you know how difficult it can be to surrender what God is asking for. Please don’t make it harder for me and other women like me to keep our Isaac on the altar. Other childless women in your church or mission context may have different reasons, but don’t forget that we are all women, and this topic is one of the most sensitive that can be discussed. Please don’t joke with us or make sly comments. Please don’t try to counsel us if we didn’t ask for it.

I have had fellow missionaries tell me that I will be an ineffective witness if I do not have children, since, presumably, women in this part of the world will never listen to my advice if I cannot demonstrate my

competency as a mother. These kinds of messages are not to be found in either Scripture or in the Spirit of Prophecy, nor have they been proven in any kind of longitudinal study that compares the long-term ministry effectiveness of childless women versus mothers. Until academic studies or the scriptural witness can even begin to suggest that missionary mothers are significantly more effective in ministry than childless missionary women, I can only interpret these messages as a form of discrimination.

I have truly appreciated how the Adventist Church has made groundbreaking advances in providing for special needs individuals, such as the blind, deaf, and physically handicapped. They are different, but we lovingly accept them just as they are. Adventist churches open their doors to black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and Arab members. We are a global family with a level of inclusiveness that makes everyone feel at home. Please, let's make sure not to judge or push our opinions on childless women, either in the mission field or in our local churches at home. They each have a story, but tread softly because for all the plastic smiles we paste on, it really is sensitive ground.

Now, with that matter discussed, let's get back to the fun part. If you have children of your own, we would be more than happy to take them for a twirl on the merry-go-round while you finish your potluck lunch. And when they are sweaty, exhausted, and hungry, we'll give them back and thank you for letting us have a good time with them. Secretly, the childless woman in your church or mission context may be wishing for her own sweaty little munchkin to take home, but then again, maybe not. In the end, it's not really your business to know.

Works Cited

White, Ellen G. 1973. *The Adventist Home*. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing.

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